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ABSTRACT

Accurate data on the number of students who transfer from two-year colleges to senior colleges are not available because the ways of counting transfers vary greatly from system to system and state to state. While most studies define transfer students as those who have taken courses at a community college and subsequently enroll at a senior institution, there is little agreement as to the number of units that must be taken before the student achieves transfer status. Statewide definitions range from 30 semester credit hours to one quarter hour of credit--some states set no credit hour limits at all. Methods of collecting the data on transfers also vary depending upon whether the researcher is based at a community college or at a state office. Data obtained by college-based researchers are frequently invalidated by low response rates to surveys due to the high mobility of community college students. Nonreturning students and interstate transfers are especially difficult to trace. In cases where the community colleges rely exclusively upon the universities in their region for transfer information, figures are particularly misleading due to missing and incomplete data and other imbalances caused by variations in data collection methods. Tracing students who "stop in" and "stop out" of different types of postsecondary institutions continues to be a problem as data collection systems do not accommodate them. A bibliography is included. (DB)

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JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

July 1979

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COUNTING THE TRANSFER STUDENTS

By

Arthur M. Cohen
Director

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES
Arthur M. Cohen, *Principal Investigator and Director*

ERIC JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

July 1979

COUNTING THE TRANSFER STUDENTS

Guest: "No more, thanks. I've eaten two helpings already."
Host: "It was three you had, but who's counting?"

How many students transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities? No accurate answer can be given to that deceptively simple question because the ways of counting transfers vary greatly from system to system and from state to state.

Consider the following: Five students in junior standing at a university are asked about their educational background. The first one explains that he did his first two years in a community college and the university concurrently, that he took all his general education courses in the community college while he was taking courses in the major field in the university. The second replies that he started in the university as a freshman, dropped out to spend his next term in the community college, then came back to the university and has been there ever since. The third says that he took two courses at a community college in the summer after his high school graduation and then transferred to the university. The fourth studied for one year at a community college ten years earlier and when he decided to come back to school, entered the university as a sophomore. The fifth finished his first two years at the community college and transferred as a junior in mid-year. How many of the five are "transfer students?" *None,* according to some reports; *all,* according to others.

Problems of Definition

The first problem, then, is one of definition: Who is a transfer student? Few researchers cling to the archaic, "A transfer student is a person enrolled in a transfer course (or program) at a community college," because numerous graduates of "occupational" or "terminal" programs actually transfer to senior institutions. For example, 7 percent of the students who had graduated from occupational/technical programs in Texas community colleges in 1975-76 were enrolled in universities in the following year and 6 percent of the nonreturning occupational/technical majors had transferred (*Nonreturning Students Data Summary . . .* , 1977; *State Follow-up Reporting . . .* , 1977). Further, an ever-shrinking number of "transfer course" enrollees ever set foot on a university campus after attending the two-year college. Many of them already have baccalaureate degrees. They take the "transfer course" in Photography to gain access to the darkroom, the "transfer course" in Art so that they may have their paintings criticized, the "transfer course" in Literature in order to associate with people who enjoy talking about books. More students now probably transfer from four-year to two-year colleges than from two-year to four-year.

Most studies define the transfer students as those people who have taken courses at a community college and subsequently enrolled at a senior institution. Even so, the definitional problem has not been resolved. How many units must the former community college students take at the universities before they are counted? When Southern West Virginia Community College conducted a follow-up of all students who had attended the institution between 1967 and 1972 and had subsequently transferred to Marshall University, they counted as transfers only those who had earned at least *30 semester credit hours* at each institution (Nolan and Hall, 1974). At the other extreme, a Florida statewide study defined a transfer student "as one who is enrolled at one of the nine state universities for at least *one quarter hour* of credit and whose college of last attendance was a Florida public community college" (*Articulation,* 1976, p. 3). Similarly, in a Maryland statewide study, "transfer refers to *any work* at another college or university since leaving the community college" (Tschechtelin and Others, 1976, p. 25) (Emphasis added). And New York defines transfer as "those *undergraduate* students who were enrolled at a given State University institution for the first time . . . but who had attended other colleges or universities prior . . . " (Annas and Dean, 1976, p. ix). No credit hour limits are specified.

How many units must the students have taken at a community college before they are included in the count? New Jersey defines a transfer student as anyone "who moves from a two-year to a four-year college with *one or more credits* earned at the sending college . . . " (Emphasis added). However, the reporters are aware of the problem with this definition, acknowledging that "many of the students who transfer with very few credits are identified by the colleges as entering freshmen. Hence, estimates of the numbers of transfers may be uniformly low" (Miller, 1976, pp. 1-2). The California Postsecondary Education Commission attempts to mitigate that problem by counting as a transfer only those students who have earned *at least 12 units* at a community college prior to entering the University of California or the California State College and University system.

Collecting the Data

The methods of collecting the data on transfers vary considerably depending on whether the researcher is based at a community college or at a state office. The data obtained by community college-based researchers usually are collected by sending questionnaires to the graduates and/or the nonreturning students. The most serious problem with these types of studies is in the questionnaire response rate, typically quite low at least in part because of the high mobility of the community college student population. As an example, a California community college researcher recently sent questionnaires to a carefully drawn sample of all students who had enrolled in the college one year previously and 31 percent of the forms were returned by the post office with an indication that the person had moved and left no forwarding address (Garber, 1979).

Nonreturning students are especially difficult to trace. The response rate for the 1975-76 Texas community college nonreturning student survey was 35 percent (*Nonreturning Students Data Summary . . .* , 1977). A 1978 Hawaii nonreturning student survey yielded 48 percent (Hawaii Community College System, 1978). In a Maryland statewide study each community college mailed surveys 3½ years later to students who had entered in fall 1972. After adjusting for non-deliver-

able forms the response rate was 48 percent. A nonrespondent bias check revealed that "nonrespondents were found to be significantly less interested in transfer goals . . . " (Tschechtelin and Others, 1976, p. 9). Similar findings were attained in a San Jose City College survey; only 47 percent of the whole group responded but 68 percent of those who had transferred returned their questionnaires (Guthart, 1978). The Maryland study is notable for its nonrespondent bias check. Few researchers are as meticulous and some fail to indicate response rates at all. An Oregon study reports with no further explanation, "Ten community colleges participated in the 1975-76 follow-up study and this report tabulates the some 1,487 responses from former students" (Oregon State Department of Education, 1977, p. 1).

Missing Data

In cases where the colleges do not survey their own students, they often rely on the universities in their region to send reports. But the transfer figures that come from the senior institutions have their own problems. For one thing, the information is frequently incomplete. The universities usually report only the transfers they receive from community colleges in that state. Thus the students who attend a community college in one state and enroll in a senior institution in another state are lost to the records. Similarly, records may be lost for those students who drop out of the university and are readmitted or who stay out for a year or more between community college and university attendance. A Florida report notes the problem: "Specifically, some of the universities lose community college of origin codes from their data systems as students drop out and are readmitted. Further, when students change from undergraduate status to graduate status some universities fail to keep this data element. Thus, a breakout of data of students of community college origin will not include these students" (Nickens and Others, 1975, p. 3).

Sometimes the missing data result from the failure of senior institutions to report anything at all. The research division of the Pennsylvania Department of Education Bureau of Information Systems requested data on community college transfer students from 110 four-year institutions in that state and only 56 of them responded with usable data. The report went on to state, "Each of the colleges or universities . . . were contacted to . . . indicate as to whether the reported figures accurately state the transfer picture at those institutions." One reported, "Perhaps the figure was somewhat inflated." Another, "The figure seems high." A third, "thought that the one transfer reported . . . was inaccurate data" (Martinko, 1978, p. 6). An earlier Pennsylvania report had acknowledged that "data for the leading transfer recipient in 1973 was [sic] not available for 1974 . . . . Several [private] colleges known to accept sizable numbers of transfers . . . did not furnish information for this report" (Martinko, 1975, pp. 3-4).

Even the best-designed studies suffer from missing data. A follow-up of students who entered California community colleges for the first time in 1972 was based on data provided by a sample of 32 colleges. However, "Two of the colleges that were unable to provide [data] . . . were among those with the largest numbers of transfer students . . . " (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1979, p. 2). The Illinois Community College Board reported a follow-up study of transfer students in that state using data provided by 24 senior institutions "which are estimated to account for over 90% of the community college transfers" (1977, p. 6).

Further imbalances result when the community colleges survey their graduates and the universities report the status of transfers who may have been enrolled at a community college during the previous term without graduating. The Pennsylvania community colleges reported 3,132 "graduate transfers" in 1974 including 366 students who went out of state. For the same year the Pennsylvania universities reported having received 4,001 community college transfers. The report notes: "The community college enrollments reported by the receiving institutions are larger than the graduate transfers because they include graduate as well as nongraduate transfers. Also, the figures include students who have a time lapse between the completion of their community college studies and a transfer into a four-year program" (Martinko, 1975, p. v).

Or is the "transfer student" attending the university at all? Some community colleges only approximate the number of their transfers by pro-rating the number of transcript requests coming from the four-year institutions. Others attempt to gain accurate, if incomplete, data by waiting until the enrollment at the four-year institution has actually occurred and verifying the student's response with the registration office at the receiving institutions. Imbalances also result when some colleges collect data on transfers over a calendar year, others for a fiscal year. Summer graduates are in some cases counted as part of the previous year, in others as part of the forthcoming year. Data collected by the receiving institution rarely separate graduates from those who have transferred before obtaining an associate degree and there is no distinction between persons who transfer directly from the community college and those who have stopped out of school for a period of time.

Which Students Get Counted?

The problems of tracing students who stop in and stop out of different types of postsecondary institutions continue to plague the data collectors. The data systems in most states have been organized to accommodate information about those students who begin at a community college, take a year or two of work there, and transfer to a university in a succeeding term. However, this group represents a small proportion of the total community college population and may not even be a majority of those who do transfer. The flow of students has many eddies and the data systems simply do not accommodate them. The student who attends the university, then goes to the community college, and eventually to the university again is counted as a transfer student in some states, not in others. The student who stays out for a term between community college and university attendance is usually counted. But the student who attends a community college in one state and a university in another is rarely included in the data tabulations. As one report notes, "Moreover, two-year to four-year transfers in New Jersey represent only one piece of the transfer puzzle, for students are moving increasingly from two-year to two-year colleges, from four-year to four-year colleges, and from four-year to two-year colleges" (Miller, 1976, p. 2). Similarly an Illinois study reports, "The patterns of transfer indicate that 'from junior to senior college' is not the dominant transfer route. As many transfer students are received by junior colleges as are received by senior colleges" (Darnes and Others, 1971, p. 19). And the National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the early 1970s, four-year to two-year college transfers were equivalent (National Center for Education Statistics, 1977).

The data collectors are not unmindful of the limitations in the data. Many of the reports urge caution in interpreting the statistics. They often are particularly careful to point out that comparisons from one year to another should not be made because of the differences in response rate and reporting categories. As a New Jersey report indicates, "The lack of complete information and sophisticated research has prevented the full knowledge of the extent of student turnover on a statewide basis" (Apetz and Others, 1975, p. 31). Knoell has commented that reliable information is not available because the assumptions on which the data systems are organized are not valid. She pointed out that the students cannot be studied as though they progress "from semester to semester, and from year to year, in curricula leading to degrees

and certificates and/or transfer. The assumption ignores the increasing majority of Community College students who are enrolled in programs in continuing education of their own design, whose objectives are achieved in non-traditional patterns of enrollment" (Knoell and Others, 1976, p. 9). Other researchers too have made pleas for better reporting procedures. From Pennsylvania: "There needs to be a system of reporting between the transmitting and receiving institutions so that community colleges can effectively follow their graduates . . . " (Martinko, 1976, p. 8). From California: "A renewed effort should be made to improve reporting and analysis of data for Community College students who transfer to baccalaureate institutions, including information about their choice of campus, units transferred, grades earned during the first semester, and other data which are computerized" (California Community and Junior College Association, 1977, p. 22).

Conclusion

In sum, accurate data on the number of students who transfer from two-year colleges to senior institutions is not available. A single college, a single state may have more or less reliable information but it is impossible to compare with the corresponding data from other colleges and other states because of the varying definitions and reporting procedures employed. Missing data, poor response rates, varying interpretations of the number of units the students must take at one or another institution before they are counted, and the biases inherent in any data collection procedure ensure that all interpretations must be made with caution. The report writers could readily contribute to reducing the problem if they would merely state how the data were compiled, which definitions of students were used, and in the case of student surveys, which categories of students were surveyed, how the samples were drawn, what the students were asked, and how many responded. Strange as it may seem, they rarely do.

How many students transfer? The question may not be important to those who see the transfer education function of community college as only a sideline to its other roles but it is important to legislators and to the public. The available reports are not merely of esoteric interest. Transfer courses are sometimes funded on a formula different from occupational or adult basic education courses and funding agencies deserve valid data. Further, although the public perception of the two-year college as the point of first entry to higher education may have dimmed in recent years, it certainly is still prevalent. When the community colleges in one state claim that half their students transfer and in another they show but 5 percent moving to the four-year institutions, a woefully misleading image is projected.

Examples of the varying data reported may be seen in the following table of transfers in different states. Some of the variation may be accounted for by truly different missions and patterns of student enrollment in the different states. However, it is likely that a greater part of the variation is due to differences in the way the students are counted.

State	Year	Total Two-Year College Enrollment*	Transfers	%
California	1977	1,091,988	40,323	4
Florida	1978	191,419	28,846	15
Illinois	1973	233,396	10,145	4
New Jersey	1974	70,619	5,628	8
New York	1977	255,549	22,784	9
Pennsylv.	1975	68,984	4,278	6
Washington	1978	170,286	3,852	2

*Caveat emptor. A discussion of the vagaries in counting community college enrollments would require a lengthy paper of its own.

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